

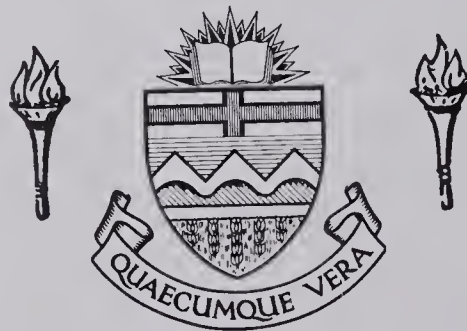
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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

YEATS'S ANCESTRAL THEATRE

by



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A THESIS

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies, for acceptance, a thesis entitled Yeats's Ancestral Theatre, submitted by Anne F. O'Grady in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.



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ABSTRACT

The Preface of this thesis discusses Yeats's conception of an ancestral art and its relation to life. He tries to express the ancestral quality of life, a sense of past tradition and culture which informs the present, in a dramatic form which is itself ancestral - ritualistic, solemn and stylized.

The first part clarifies the nature of the ancestral by tracing it in the later poetry of Yeats. The poems of "The Tower" are largely concerned with his desire to perpetuate his ancestral heritage through his descendants and through his art. The tower is the heroic, aristocratic aspect of the ancestral; the folk or peasant aspect is symbolized by the thatched cottage.

The second and third parts discuss the establishment of the ancestral theatre in the Abbey, and Yeats's experiments with a specifically literary drama. These experiments include a renovation of the conventional stage, so that all aspects of the theatre exhibit the ritualistic features of Japanese Noh. Stylization extends even to acting. By ritualizing movement, simplifying scene, and covering the actor's personality with

a mask, Yeats tries to achieve a universality of reference which is basic to myth. He refuses to cater to the naturalistic bias of his audience, yet cannot entirely dismiss its criticism, and on occasion is forced to compromise his ideas.

In the fourth part, several plays are discussed in relation to Yeats's sense of the ancestral: the folk imagination finds expression in his early plays, the heroic in The Shadowy Waters. Three plays of widely divergent form portray the ancestral through the life of Cuchulain, an Irish legendary hero, whose tragic life symbolizes the condition of humanity. In The Words Upon the Window-Pane and in Purgatory, Yeats portrays the death of the ancestral, the destruction of ceremony and culture by the decadent present.

In conclusion Yeats's contribution to verse drama is discussed, and the ancestral theatre assessed.

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PREFACE

THE NATURE OF THE ANCESTRAL

We were the last romantics - chose for theme
Traditional sanctity and loveliness.

For William Butler Yeats, art is the supreme monument to man's intellect. It discovers a reality which lies below surface experience, and frees the soul from the endless cycle of birth and death, the ephemeral moment which passes even as it comes into being. Reality does not exist in the present, but lies "at the meeting of the two beams of the cross, and at the trysting-place of mortal and immortal, time and eternity,"¹ the simultaneity of past, present and future. The past lives through the present into the future. Man is determined by his ancestry; his destiny is formed by the ancestral past, and he must work out the inevitable consequences of former lives and deeds. His past may impede or potentiate, but it participates in his life and is in turn bequeathed to his son. This accumulation of experience informs tradition and culture. All the rich tradition of the past which is inherent in surface experience, the elements of continuity in society, an apprehension of time which encompasses all time, this constitutes the nature of the

ancestral. Yeats expresses this ancestral reality in his poetry and in his plays. He deplores the quotidian and superficial journalism of his contemporaries, because it lacks feeling for tradition and depth in time:

Caught in that sensual music all neglect
Monuments of unageing intellect.

("Sailing to Byzantium", ll. 7&8)

The monuments are works of art, which recreate the richness of the past within the confines of the present for the unlimited time of the future. The form and substance of Yeats's monuments are ancestral. He attempts to realize the simultaneity of time in an artifice which necessarily eschews the probability of actuality, because it is an embodiment of reality. The artificial structure of his plays is more obvious than that of his verse, because of the preconceptions of naturalism which the audience takes to the theatre. But since he does not represent life, it follows that the form of his plays should be symbolic rather than mimetic. What he says in "Sailing to Byzantium" applies especially to his work as an artist:

Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing,
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling...

(IV, 1-4)

Yeats believes that reality can be evoked only by symbols;

the dramatic form most appropriate for the articulation of such symbols is itself ancestral, the union of the traditional dramatic structures of Japan, Greece and Renaissance England. Japanese Noh provides the radical ancestral structure, the traditional dance and song, the ritual of movement and speech which is the heritage of the Japanese nobility. The nature of the ancestral is, then, both a way of life, the timeless moment of reality amidst flux, and a method of presenting this reality through art.

This concern with the ancestral has little in common with a romantic veneration of the past, although Yeats is guilty of nostalgic evocations in his early poetry and plays, particularly those which depict the myth and magic of early Ireland. While recognizing the nobility and grandeur of his ancestors, Yeats is aware that the beauty of their culture was often born of hatred and strife. There is an odour of blood on the ancestral stair:

Some violent bitter man, some powerful man
Called architect and artist in, that they,
Bitter and violent men, might rear in stone
The sweetness that all longed for night and day,
The gentleness none there had ever known...

("Meditations in Time of Civil War",
I 'Ancestral Houses', ll. 17-21)

The greatness of the past must be taken with its brutality. But the ancestral houses of Ireland remained for Yeats monuments to man's imagination and intellect. They symbolize the

best of Irish culture and tradition - the beauty of life rarely glimpsed and more rarely apprehended. Coole House, the residence of his friend, Lady Gregory, was Yeats's epitome of an ancestral house. In this atmosphere of rich mahoganies and faded tapestries his imagination was nourished by the glories of the past:

Thoughts long-knitted into a single thought,
A dance-like glory that those walls begot.

("Coole Park, 1929", ll. 7-8)

Lady Gregory was an ancestral figure, considered by Yeats to be one of the few remaining aristocrats; she both stimulated the artistic imagination of others, and expressed her own feeling for the ancestral. Her collection of Irish legends deepened Yeats's sense of the semi-feudal past, and provided much of the subject-matter of his poems and plays. He felt an affinity for the aristocratic, ancestral climate of Coole House:

A spot whereon the founders lived and died
Seemed once more dear than life; ancestral trees,
Or gardens rich in memory glorified
Marriages, alliances and families,
And every bride's ambition satisfied.
Where fashion or mere fantasy decrees
We shift about - all that great glory spent -
Like some poor Arab tribesman and his tent.

("Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931", ll. 33-40)

Art must substantiate the ephemeral present by a sense of the permanent in the annals of time:

Every day I notice some new analogy between the long-established life of the well-born and the artist's life. We come from the permanent things and create them, and instead of old blood we have old emotions and we carry in our heads always that form of society artistocracies create now and again for some brief moment at Urbino or Versailles. We too despise the mob and suffer at its hands.²

The deep feeling experienced in the present is part of the experience of a whole culture. "Emotion grows intoxicating and delightful after it has been enriched with the memory of old emotions and experience."³ This sense of ancestry is closely allied with religious experience, a feeling of permanence, stability and value.

A sense of the ancestral is a sense of the experience and emotions of a race, which find expression in recurring symbols or archetypes. We could then call such symbols ancestral. They evoke the Anima Mundi, a single energy or great memory which subsumes individual minds, and gives them reality. The soul cannot attain knowledge until it shakes off the habit of time and place and identifies with the Anima Mundi. Recurrent emotions assume a ritualistic expression, ritual being the accumulation and repetition of symbols. Formal ritual, stylized and distant from the quotidian is the expression of the deepest experiences of a race. It is then the most appropriate form for the ancestral sense of the simultaneity of past, present and future. The ancestral past not only influences the substance of art, it moulds the

appropriate form.

Yeats's predominant ancestral symbols reflect his concern with the decline of nobility and culture which are the roots of society. His ancestral houses are decaying, or as in Purgatory, completely destroyed by the encroachment of the coarse, common present. Similarly, the trees of aristocracy, the untainted line of nobility, are blasted or wasted. Such symbols, his art questions for meaning:

I pace upon the battlements and stare
On the foundations of a house, or where
Tree, like a sooty finger, starts from the earth;
And send imagination forth
Under the day's declining beam, and call
Images and memories
From ruin or from ancient trees,
For I would ask a question of them all.

("The Tower", II, ll. 1-8)

The symbol of the ancestral, with all its complexities and diversities, is, however, the tower. It is both a physical fact and the emotional centre of Yeats's art, and an understanding of its significance in the poems clarifies the concept of the ancestral theatre.⁴

The poetry of "The Tower" expresses Yeats's sense of the ancestral. Such a complex emotional concept is perhaps best embodied in poetry:

The human soul, in intense emotion, strives to express itself in verse.... The tendency...of prose drama is to emphasize the ephemeral and superficial; if we want to get at the permanent and universal we tend to express ourselves in verse.⁵

Since the ancestral partakes of the permanent and universal, it seems appropriate that Yeats should try to introduce lyric intensity and depth into the theatre. The conversational prose of the naturalist school was true only to surface experience, and usually failed even in its attempts at "realism". The development of Yeats's plays is a movement toward the union of lyrical mood and style with dramatic form; they are a series of experiments in the adjustment of the demands of poetry to the rigors of the stage.

Yeats was not content to write in isolation: he felt the need of an audience, and believed himself to be fundamentally a dramatist, desiring to show events and not merely tell of them: "I seem to myself most alive at the moment when a room full of people share the one lofty emotion."⁶ Moreover he asserted the integral relation of drama and poetry: "As drama approaches its highest themes and its richest, most concentrated representation of human action, it tends to use the language of poetry,"⁷ translating poetic intention in terms of gesture, voice and setting. In mood and form it approaches the purity and concentration of religious ritual, working through mystery and suggestion to attain a remoteness from actuality. The artist is another priest when he restores and aesthetic laws of truth and beauty and stimulates the "intellectual" emotions. Yeats's lyrical

theatre is the union of ancestral house and passion.

Passion is the substance of tragedy, and tragedy is the substance of life. The conception of life as ancestral necessitates an acceptance of all the limitations which the past imposes upon the individual and the race. With propensities for the divine, man is dragged down by the errors of his ancestors, the consequences of which he must live out and pass on to his heirs. Although constantly compelled to make agonizing choices, man has the seeds of his destiny already implanted within him; his fate is his ancestral heritage. The remorseless cycle of destruction and remorse in Purgatory spirals down on a seemingly endless gyre of calamity. The Old Man cannot release his mother's soul, nor free himself from the consequences of her actions. Similarly, in The Dreaming of the Bones, the ancestral shades try to work out their salvation through the lives of their descendants. Yeats's metaphysics demands a full acceptance of the self with its strength and weakness, and of life with its beauty and its horror:

There is in the creative joy an acceptance of what life brings, because we have understood the beauty of what it brings, or a hatred of death for what it takes away, which arouses within us, through some sympathy perhaps with all other men, an energy so noble, so powerful, that we laugh aloud and mock, in the terror or the sweetness of our exultation, at death and oblivion.⁸

For Yeats tragedy is not so much a dramatic form, but a

condition of existence; we only begin to live when we have conceived life as tragic. Tragedy is never passive suffering or resignation, but joyful acceptance and affirmation amidst the fatal illogic of existence, and, as such, tragedy can best be articulated in the theatre. Ancestral drama is Yeats's "search for more of manful energy, more of cheerful acceptance of whatever arises out of the logic of events, and for clear outlines, instead of those outlines of lyric poetry that are blurred with desire and vague regret."⁹ It is perhaps ironic that the Self in "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" repudiates death with the ancestral symbols of love and war, affirming the glory and beauty of life with instruments of suffering, a consecrated blade, and a "flowering, silken, old embroidery, torn/ From some court-lady's dress." (ll. 13 & 14) The Self will endure gladly all the consequences of his acts and thoughts:

I am content to follow to its source
 Every event in action or in thought;
 Measure the lot; forgive myself the lot!
 When such as I cast out remorse
 So great a sweetness flows into the breast
 We must laugh and we must sing,
 We are blest by everything,
 Everything we look upon is blest.

(II, ll. 25-32)

In his ancestral theatre, Yeats dramatizes this tragedy of life, which he so keenly feels through his sense of the simultaneity of past, present and future. The supernatural,

that element of fate in his plays, is another symbolic manifestation of the ancestral past. It is an occidental version of the appearance of ancestors in Japanese Noh, ghosts which govern the destinies of men by bringing them to the moment of choice. The supernatural, like the ancestral past, is both a source of strength, since it stimulates the achievement of human dignity and identity, and an enemy, since it effects the final destruction of the individual.

Yeats's sense of the ancestral probably evolved from his interest in history and myth. For him history is a continuum in which every individual participates, reliving the experiences of the race. Yeats's symbol for this recurrence of events and personalities is the gyre, which unwinds and rewinds the fatal coils of life.

Those that Rocky Face holds dear,
Lovers of horses and of women, shall,
From marble of a broken sepulchre,
Or dark betwixt the polecat and the owl,
Or any rich, dark nothing disinter
The workman, noble and saint, and all things run
On that unfashionable gyre again.

("The Gyres", ll. 18-24)

Moreover, he feels strong affinities with specific historical personages, whom he considers his ancestors - Plotinus and Swift, for example. Similarly he identifies with the mythical and legendary figures of Ireland. Cuchulain in his heroic mask, his antithetical Self, whose courage and

fortitude he admires. Hanrahan is a more boisterous, rowdy projection of Yeats's personality, the peasant complement to the noble Cuchulain.¹⁰

The History of Ireland, or Bardic History written by Standish O'Grady in 1878-1880 inspired many young Irish poets to draw upon the rich material of Ireland's history. O'Grady's book was of epic proportion, in which history mingled freely with myth. His intention was the reconstruction by imaginative processes of the life led by his Irish ancestors. He effectively reduced to its mythic and artistic elements, the heroic period of Irish history.¹¹ Yeats readily saw the potential of such material: the ancestral roots of Ireland, the beginning of a literary tradition awaited artistic expression. It was Lady Gregory, however, who directed his attention to the stories of Cuchulain, heroic struggles of passion and violence which immortalized the inner conflicts of man. Yeats wrote, "she and I felt that we had got down, as it were, into some fibrous darkness, into some matrix out of which everything has come."¹² Such mythic material furnished a "natural pleasure" because it told men of "their own life, or that life of poetry where every man can see his own image, because there alone does human nature escape from arbitrary conditions."¹³ Myth is the articulation of the corporate experience of "all the dumb classes each with its

own knowledge of the world."¹⁴ Yeats's ancestral theatre is a people's theatre, "not an exploitation of local colour, or of a limited form of drama possessing a temporary novelty."¹⁵ The legendary and mythical substance of his plays is not an escape into the past, but a realization of its rich, symbolic potential in the present. His symbolic language reaches far back into the past, while retaining an association with familiar names and places to establish a reality which supersedes the "obscure impressions of the senses." "Reaching back to 'that early phase of every civilization...where everything is prescribed, as buried under dream and myth', he finds his source in 'the oldest of the aristocracies of thought', folk art, the golden dream of king and peasant."¹⁶ Ireland's Gaelic literature is the utterance of the imagination of Europe.

I

THE TOWER

O honey-bees,
Come build in the empty house of the stare.

The tower is Yeats's monument to his unaging intellect, the objective correlative of his art, the symbol of his aspirations and his defeats. Its crumbling battlements are relics of the aristocratic past, the half-dead top of the present to which the ancestral stair winds. This powerful emblem eroded by time and decay, Yeats sets up in mockery of the present, in remembrance of the ancestral past, and as a heritage for the future. The tower is also a refuge and symbol for his old age, "a place to influence lawless youth, with its severity and antiquity."¹⁷ Within its walls he will establish a new dynasty, bequeathing to his heirs his pride, "like that of the morn,/ When the headlong light is loosed" ("The Tower", III, ll. 4 & 5), his faith in love, truth and beauty, amidst the bitterness of life, and his unaging intellect:

Having inherited a vigorous mind
From my old fathers, I must nourish dreams
And leave a woman and a man behind
As vigorous of mind...

("The Tower", IV My Descendants, ll. 1-4)

Yet he is aware that his descendants may pollute the family line through "natural declension of the soul", or through "marriage with a fool", and like the ancestral house in Purgatory, the tower would become a "roofless ruin". But as a monument to his art, it would survive such corruption:

The Primum Mobile that fashioned us
 Has made the very owls in circles move;
 And I, that count myself most prosperous,
 Seeing that love and friendship are enough,
 For an old neighbour's friendship chose the house
 And decked and altered it for a girl's love,
 And know whatever flourish and decline
 These stones remain their monument and mine.

(ll. 17-24)

Yeats purchased the ruins of this ancestral tower in Galway from the Congested Districts Board in 1917, intending to create from it a summer home for his family, and an appropriate atmosphere of nobility and antiquity in which to develop his art. The past is revived again in the present; he lives within the past and allows its traditions to act upon him, so that he may create a heritage for the future. From his vantage point high in the battlements, he can gaze over space and time. The tower's history is one of violence, and adversity. Its cold, hard stones have echoed to the iron feet of fighting men, and the dust of loneliness has coated its stairs. The spiralling stone stair is the turning of time and events, the unravelling of consequences, the integral relation of past and present. The chamber arched with stone to which this gyre

climbs is Yeats's sanctified place of creativity amidst the ancestral past. In the experience of his ancestors, he finds himself; their memories become his, for they have already anticipated his life:

Did all old men and women, rich and poor,
 Who trod upon these rocks or passed this door,
 Whether in public or in secret rage
 As I do now against old age?
 But I have found an answer in those eyes
 That are impatient to be gone;
 Go therefore; but leave Hanrahan,
 For I need all his mighty memories.

("The Tower", II, ll. 81-88)

The tower is the Palace of Art in which the soul dwells. Its ancient stair ascends to an apprehension of eternity and peace. But the lure of the ancestral is fatal when it is isolated from the living present. A complete emersion in the past culminates in the oblivion of death:

Think of ancestral night that can,
 If but imagination scorn the earth
 And intellect its wandering
 To this and that and t'other thing,
 Deliver from the crime of death and birth.

("A Dialogue of Self and Soul", ll. 20-24)

Yeats rebuilt a monument to the heroic, the aristocratic life of Ireland, but the tower is only one aspect of the ancestral theatre; primarily it was to be a people's theatre: "One wants to write for one's own people, who come to the playhouse with a knowledge of one's subjects and with hearts ready to be moved."¹⁸ Then literature would become

folk art, "the possession of the people", and her artists the spiritual leaders of the age, speaking "out of a people to a people."¹⁹ Yeats felt an affinity and sympathy with the common people of Ireland. But he did not seek to express the life of the peasant; his interest was in the peasant imagination. The ancestral theatre was to absorb the rich substance of legend and folk-lore, and the vibrance and colour of the Irish people. The "high life" of the ancestral past is inextricably part of the common present, and both must be expressed in his art.

Every aristocratic form has its own ancestry, and the more elaborate it is, the more is the writer constrained to symbolize rather than to represent life.... I could not get away, no matter how clearly I watched the country life, from images and dreams which had all too royal blood, for they were descended like the thought of every poet from all the conquering dreams of Europe, and I wished to make that high life mix into some rough contemporary life without ceasing to be itself....²⁰

The tower constituted only part of Thoor Ballylee. Its harsh, violent structure was tempered by the presence of a thatched cottage, which Yeats retained as initial living quarters while repairs were progressing on the tower: "Thoor is Irish for tower, and it will keep people from suspecting us of modern gothic and a deer park. I think the harsh sound of 'Thoor' amends the softness of [Ballylee]"²¹ In these two buildings he combined the aristocratic and heroic with common peasant life, the dual impulse of the ancestral theatre.

Rhythmic speech, the living, colourful idiom of the peasant, is the heart of Yeats's drama. This surprising organic language is akin in process to poetry,²² and its full musical effect depends on the proper delivery of the fine word. Such a heritage of imaginative speech Yeats considers integral to the ancestral theatre, "the speech of the countryside, the eloquence of poets, of rhythm, of style, of proud, living, unwasted words,...for he would restore the whole ancient art of passionate speech."²³

Yeats is thus able to link the heroic and the common, the ancestral and the contemporary in his drama through the use of popular myth, a union appropriately symbolized by his residence - Thoor Ballylee and a thatched cottage. The two passions of Ireland, love of the Unseen Life and love of country find artistic embodiment in the ancestral theatre.

II

ANCESTRAL DRAMA

And this brought forth a dream and soon enough
This dream itself had all my thought and love.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, English drama had disintegrated into farce and melodrama. The great drama of the past was distorted by an over-emphasis on character and a veneration of particular actors, or eclipsed by the sumptuous elaboration of its own scenery. The sole concern of theatre managers was commercial, and any artistic innovations were subjected to the criterion of popularity. This "theatre of commerce" was a degradation of all artistic values: the poor art of acting had replaced the noble art of oratory, meretricious landscapes were substituted for the descriptions of poetry so that painted scenery superseded the story in importance.²⁴ Style was sacrificed to colloquialism of dialogue and journalistic effectiveness. In England the only playwrights worthy of note were poets such as Byron, Wordsworth, and Browning, who produced long dramatic works in verse intended for private reading, not the stage.

In Ireland the situation was no better. Ireland had not developed any form of national drama; its cultural

traditions were oral, and the rich fabric of Irish legend was never given formal artistic embodiment. Its theatre had been imposed from without by the English Protestant guilds, and the significant Irish dramatists, such as Congreve, Wilde and Shaw belonged to English culture. In the nineteenth century, the Irish theatre was dependent on England for its plays and its players, and although it shared the commercial concerns of its counterpart, it also was a vehicle for propaganda and politics.

A new interest in the theatre as an artistic medium developed with the infiltration of European experimental drama, particularly that of Ibsen. In 1891 an Independent Theatre was established in London; following the example of the Free Theatres of Berlin and Paris, it produced stimulating experimental drama which strived for artistic autonomy. Among the plays it produced were those of W.B. Yeats and George Moore. The whole art of theatre was being subjected to a close re-evaluation.

Yeats deplored the values of the theatre of commerce, and opposed the infiltration of politics into the art of drama. He also censored "propagandist plays, [and] plays written mainly to serve some obvious moral purpose for art seldom concerns itself with these interests or opinions that can be defended by argument, but with realities of emotion

and character that become self-evident when made vivid to the imagination."²⁵ The artist must use the raw material of his experience to fashion his work of art, and cannot thus repudiate all circumstances of time and place, but the personal element must be refined into universality of reference. Nor is the artist confined by the cultural milieu of his own country. "Yeats required of his art stability in the culture of his nation and free passport to the wisdom of the ages."²⁶

At about the same time as the dramatic revival in England, a new interest in the Gaelic language, and in Irish tradition was growing in Ireland. Yeats belonged to the Dublin Literary Society, one of the many groups devoted to the cultivation of a new Irish literature inspired by Gaelic myth. The time was ripe for the establishment of an experimental, literary theatre in Ireland, and it came into being through the collaboration of four divergent personalities: Lady Gregory, seeking an expression of the folk mind and a distinctly National drama; George Moore, a cultured artist more interested in European tradition than Irish peasants; Edward Martyn, drawn to the drama of ideas through the influence of Ibsen; and Yeats, motivated by the desire for an ancestral theatre which expressed the symbolic validity of the past, and the reality of the imagination. Their purpose in initiating the Irish Literary Theatre was to build up a

Celtic and Irish school of dramatic literature. They hoped "to find in Ireland an uncorrupted and imaginative audience trained to listen by its passion for oratory [and believed that their] desire to bring upon the stage the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland [would ensure for them] a tolerant welcome, and that freedom to experiment which is not found in the theatres of England, and without which no new movement in art or literature can succeed."²⁷ Yeats favored romantic and spiritual, rather than scientific and analytical drama, a symbolic presentation of the conflict within the mind of man. His first concern was to secure Irish actors who could achieve the rhythms of speech which were the heart of his poetic plays. Just before the Literary Theatre dissolved after three years of dissension over divergent aims, Yeats found a company of amateurs directed by William and Frank Fay, both masters of elocution. A new experimental theatre was initiated in 1902 to carry out the intentions of the Literary Theatre, but without the help of Martyn and Moore, and with the help of the Fay's. The plays produced by the new Irish National Dramatic Company were to be about the life of artisans and country people, and romantic and historical plays. Once elected president, Yeats had the opportunity to experiment with his ancestral drama in the physical theatre.

Not only would he renovate the physical stage and

dramatic presentation, but he would select an audience that would both appreciate and contribute to his efforts. The delights of poetry would then be made perfect in the theatre, where they could be shared with friends, who would cultivate the subtle art of listening. In the 1903 issue of Samhain Yeats stated his theory of drama and the theatre:

I think the theatre must be reformed in its plays, its speaking, its acting and its scenery. That is to say, I think there is nothing good about it at present.

First We have to write or find plays that will make the theatre a place of intellectual excitement - a place where the mind goes to be liberated...

Second If we are to restore words to their sovereignty we must make speech more important than gesture upon the stage...

Third We must simplify acting, especially in poetic drama, in prose drama that is remote from real life...we must get rid of everything that is restless, everything that draws the attention away from the sound of the voice, or from the few moments of intense expression...

Fourth Just as it is necessary to simplify gesture so that it may accompany speech without being its rival, it is necessary to simplify both the form and colour of scenery and costume.²⁸

Initially his plays were performed in small concert halls, which were lacking in both scenic and seating accommodation. These two inhibitions and the constant shortage of funds affected the formal structure of his drama, but the necessity for simplicity of production happily complemented his artistic intent. The new theatre society received a permanent address when what was to become the Abbey Theatre was purchased by an affluent English patron, Miss A.E.F. Horniman, in 1904. In the Abbey Yeats hoped to bring to fruition his

ancestral theatre.

Always - throughout the stormy controversy which raged over his own Countess Cathleen and Synge's The Playboy of the Western World, Yeats considered the Abbey a monument of high art. It was essential that its dignity and purpose be maintained. He would concede nothing to the public and scored the opinion of critics. His sole criterion for the success of his work was its truth to imaginative experience. His ancestral drama would reveal through poetry, design and dance the impingement of the past upon the present, and would suggest that the actors existed within the minds of the audience, and the audience participated in the drama. The experience of the ancestral sense of reality would be universal despite the distinctly Irish flavor of its correlative, the heroic legend. To achieve this universality he deliberately removed his actors from common experience through the artificiality of poetry spoken against a symbolic, denuded setting. The whole structure of the play contributed to this remoteness, the strange unreal reality of a dream.

All imaginative art remains at a distance and this distance, once chosen must be firmly held against a pushing world. Verse, ritual, music, and dance in association with action require that gesture, costume, facial expression, stage arrangement must help in keeping the door. Our unimaginative arts are content to set a piece of the world as we know it in a place by itself, to put their photographs as it were in a plush or a plain frame, but the arts which interest me, while seeming to separate from the world and us a group of figures,

images, symbols, enable us to pass for a few moments into a deep of the mind that had hitherto been too subtle for our habitation. As a deep of the mind can only be approached through what is most human, most delicate, we should distrust bodily distance, mechanism, and loud noise.²⁹

The "daily mood" of surface experience must be dispelled so that we may arrive at clear perception, and actuality is replaced by "rhythm, balance, pattern, images that remind us of vast passions, the vagueness of past times, all the chimeras that haunt the edge of trance."³⁰ When art dispels the superficiality of detail which encumbers the mind, then we can experience the deepest feelings of humanity, and all life coalesces into the unity of past, present and future.

Always sensitive to the artistic forms of the past, Yeats admired much in the Elizabethan theatre, which had affinities with his own ancestral theatre - poetry, artifice and ritual. The Shakespearean stage particularly attracted him, but he recognized that its idiom was inaccessible to modern audiences because it had atrophied through distorted interpretation. He would therefore seek his own idiom, which would gain in lyrical elegance and subtlety what it would lose in mass and power. By absorbing the best of many cultures - British, Greek, Egyptian and Japanese, it could have universal application while remaining distinctly Irish in tone.

Since the ancestral sense is common to all cultures

which have built their present from the residue of the past, it is not incongruous that Yeats should adapt the form of the Japanese Noh Plays to the content of Irish myth. Although the tradition of each country appears distinctly different, their myths are remarkably similar: both acknowledge the importance of the heroic and the ancestral - the past lives continuously in the present and governs the deeds of men. Noh plays are structured around an encounter with a ghost or a god, and are developments of fourteenth century dances performed at Shinto shrines in honour of spirits. Lyric poetry was given philosophy and form by the contemplative school of Buddhism. An aristocratic drama of beauty and nobility evolved which was preserved by generations of Japanese families - a truly ancestral theatre.

Not only should the ancestral past influence the substance of art, it should, Yeats thought, mould the form. It is significant that at the time he was reconstructing Thoor Ballylee he was also writing his Noh plays; the form of both is distinguished, direct and symbolic - aristocratic. The emphasis is on barrenness and simplicity, a rigidity of style which expresses the profoundest emotions. Even the staging of these plays is aristocratic, for they were never intended for the theatre. They achieve their best effect when performed in a studio or the drawing-room of a great house, where

a few select, cultivated friends might gather to share in the emotion. Disappointed by the deviation of the Abbey directors from his literary aspirations, Yeats turned his attention to another experiment, the union of Japanese Noh and the ancestral theatre in a drawing-room.

The assimilation of the technique of the Japanese theatre brings to a culmination Yeats's ideas on the necessity for ritual and distance from "the pushing world" in a drama which strives to present spiritual reality in symbolic form. Noh drama also strives for remoteness and universality with a deliberate unfamiliarity of surface, with the intention of breaking through conventions and appearances to an underlying reality.³¹ The plays sacrifice naturalism in scene and action in order to attain a concentration on internal states and moments of vision. All the dramatic elements are stylized to the point of artificiality, so that the attention of the audience is directed to the poetry. There is virtually no scenery: a curtain is hung on the wall behind the players, and the stage is a platform surrounded on three sides by the audience. Setting is created verbally by three musicians, dream figures who remain on the fringe of the action. They describe place, time, and circumstances through song, accompanied by drum, gong, zither and flute, serving as a form of chorus, but never, as in the Greek tradition, becoming a part

of the action. This chorus preserves the mood of the play, while it rests the mind by a change of attention.³² Although it sings as much as it speaks, the choric songs must "preserve as far as possible the intonation and speed of ordinary passionate speech, for nothing can justify the degradation of an element of life even in the service of art."³³ The Japanese Noh plays also incorporate the art of dance, which is usually reserved for the climax, when passion is expressed in movement as well as song and poetry. "Instead of the players working themselves into a violence of passion..., the music, the beauty of form and voice all come to a climax in pantomimic dance."³⁴ Such a climatic dance occurs in Yeats's play The Dreaming of the Bones, in which the unappeased shades of the lovers stylistically express their grief in ordered and beautiful movements:

They cannot hear,
Being folded up and hidden in their dance.
The dance is changing now. They have dropped their eyes,
They have covered up their eyes as though their hearts
Had suddenly been broken - never, never
Shall Diarmuid and Dervorgilla be forgiven.
They have drifted in the dance from rock to rock.
They have raised their hands as though to snatch the sleep
That lingers always in the abyss of the sky
Though they can never reach it. A cloud floats up
And covers all the mountain - head in a moment:
And now it lifts and they are swept away.³⁵

Actually, Yeats had more trouble with this dance element in his own plays than with any of the Noh elements, for he found

it virtually impossible to secure actors capable of dancing in the way he desired - with a smaller gamut of expression, "more reserved, more self-controlled as befits performers within arm's reach of the audience."³⁶

To visually substantiate their impression of artificiality and remoteness, the Japanese players wear masks, in an attempt to symbolize principles of the mind, instead of remaining as individuals. The mask substitutes for the commonplace face the art of sculpture, and allows the audience to be close enough to the stage to hear every inflection of voice.³⁷ Unlike the properties of the Western stage, it is an integral work of art which survives the ephemeral performance, and is passed on to the next generation of actors, as an ancestral heritage; the mask makes permanent the fleeting art of the actor.

The advantage of a mask over a face is that it is always repeating unerringly the poetic fancy... Durability was the dominant idea in Egyptian art. The theatre must learn that lesson... Let us again cover his face with a mask in order that his expression - the visualized expression of the Poetic spirit - shall be everlasting.³⁸

Always, the emphasis is on the permanent, the universal, the ancestral.

Of the five types of Noh plays that existed, Yeats was interested primarily in the Noh of the spirits, the fourth in a cycle of six plays, which presents the complete service of

life, its diagram and recurrence. The first is a congratulatory piece (Shugen), which is connected with a religious rite about God's immemorial protection of Japan; the Shura is a battle piece in which devils are expelled by sympathetic magic; the female Kazura contrasts with the male battle pieces, expressing peace, calm, and love; the fourth play is the Noh of the spirits, a psychological play in which ghosts symbolize aspects of the mind. There are many parallels between its theme and the spiritism of Western civilization in which Yeats was also profoundly interested, as The Words Upon the Window-Pane obviously illustrates. The fifth play in the cycle deals with the moral duty of man; and the final piece, the Shugen, praises the lords and reign and asks a blessing. The whole cycle propounds the universal theme of "sic transit gloria mundi" - the transience of pleasure and beauty, and the precarious state of man's existence. Life is like a swiftly passing dream; the violence of battle is followed by the glory of peace, but it too passes in turn.³⁹ Both Japanese and Irish tradition express a pervasive sense of the ancestral, the sense of a depth of time amidst the flux of surface experience. Yeats's ancestral theatre is another attempt to realize the highest function of art, to elucidate the nature of life and reality.

III

THE PHYSICAL THEATRE

Now, as at all times, I can see, in the mind's eye,
In their stiff painted clothes, the pale unsatisfied ones
Appear and disappear in the blue depth of the sky
With all their ancient faces like rain-beaten stones.

1. The Stage

Yeats soon discovered that his ancestral drama was almost impossible to realize fully in the Abbey Theatre with its proscenium arch. He was forced to compromise some of his idiosyncratic ideas on dramatic production, reduce the preponderance of symbol and ritual, and reinstate more established dramatic conventions. Each revision of The Countess Cathleen and On Baile's Strand, for example, moves away from the aesthetic ideals of the ancestral theatre towards more traditional characterization and stagecraft. Caught in the discrepancy between theory and practice, Yeats decided to write plays which made no concession to production on a conventional stage. These dance plays completely assimilated the stagecraft of the Japanese theatre, "an ancient theatre that could be made by unrolling a carpet or marking out a place with a stick, or setting a scene against the wall."⁴⁰ In other words,

a stage was unnecessary, and was even a hindrance to a direct contact between actors and audience. The flow of passion, the evocation of subtle and complex feelings depended upon an intimate relation established between the speaker and the listener. The relaxed, yet dignified setting of a drawing-room provided the perfect atmosphere for the production of Yeats's dance plays:

In the studio and in the drawing-room alone, where the lighting was the light we are most accustomed to, did I see [the Japanese dancer] as the tragic image that he stirred my imagination. There, where no studied lighting, no stage-picture made an artificial world, he was able...to recede from us into some more powerful life. Because that separation was achieved by human means alone, he receded, but to inhabit as it were the deeps of the mind. One realized anew, at every separating strangeness, that the measure of all arts' greatness can be but in their intimacy.⁴¹

The first production of At the Hawk's Well in 1916 was in the drawing-room of Lady Cunard in Cavendish Square, before a small audience of invited guests. In such convivial surroundings Yeats could satisfy his desire for intimacy, yet he could retain the distance from surface experience required for the symbolic expression of imaginative truth. Such an intimacy does not violate aesthetic distance, because both audience and actors participate in the same reality that is remote from surface experience.

The customary elements of stagecraft exist only in rudimentary form for the dance plays. The proscenium curtain is replaced by a symbolic cloth which is unfolded and refolded

at the beginning of the play to provide the image which is the centre of action into which the play then moves,⁴² the hawk in At the Hawk's Well, for example. The same gesture is repeated by the three musicians at the end of the play. They constitute a form of chorus, which initiates, interprets, and terminates the action, providing a link between audience and players. They also produce the thin, eerie and rhythmic music of drum, gong and flute, which replaces the theatre orchestra; their unearthly sounds wail from the recesses of time, like the primitive rhythms of the soul. Gesture and movement become dance, masks cover the faces of the actors. In every aspect of his Noh plays, Yeats strives for the supremacy of art over naturalism. He refines his ancestral theatre into a gold mosaic; each part is brilliant and beautiful and is integral to the total effect.

But this form of theatre is confining and prohibitive. Once he had exploited the potential of the drawing-room, Yeats found that he was drawn back to the challenge of the Abbey Theatre. His ancestral theatre was emphasizing the aristocratic and heroic elements to the exclusion of the radical folk elements, and becoming less and less a people's theatre. He revised The Only Jealousy of Emer for the conventional stage in order to re-establish the basic impulses of traditional drama:

I rewrote the play not only to fit it for such a stage but to free it from abstraction and confusion. I have retold the story in prose which I have tried to make very simple, and left imaginative suggestion to dancers, singers, musicians.... I do not say that it is always necessary when one writes for a general audience to make the words of the dialogue so simple and so matter-of-fact; but it is necessary where the appeal is mainly to the eye and to the ear through songs and music. Fighting the Waves is in itself nothing, a mere occasion for sculptor and dancer....

(Introduction to "Fighting the Waves",
Wheels and Butterflies)

The Abbey Theatre fulfilled many of Yeats's stipulations for an adequate stage on which to produce his experimental works. Furthermore, the physical dimensions of this theatre influenced the nature of his plays, for he always wrote for the Abbey once he was established as one of its directors. The theatre was small, accommodating only five hundred and thirty-six. But the stage was also fairly small and shallow, inhibiting movement and limiting both the number of actors and the type of scenery. The proscenium opening was twenty-one feet, from the curtain line to the back wall was sixteen feet four inches, and the width of the stage from wall to wall was forty feet. Yeats preferred a projecting stage of the Elizabethan type to the proscenium arch, but the dimensions of the Abbey precluded this idea. He advocated a theatre in the shape of a half-closed fan, where the audience sat on seats that rose towards the broad end, while the play was performed at the narrow end. Then tableaux could

be composed to be seen from many points of view, and any attempt at "realistic" scenery would be exploded.⁴³

Like Shakespeare and Racine, who also wrote for small stages and therefore had to limit movement, Yeats had to get a maximum range of expression out of the voice. Hence his "theatre of speech" was partly a result of the limitations of the Abbey. Moreover, the limitations were not confined to the actual building. Meagre resources of money and material necessitated simplicity in acting and economy in costumes and scenery; such austerity amplified the wealth of the poetry and theme of Yeats's plays.⁴⁴

A theatre without wealth could lift the play out of pageantry into the mind, with a dim curtain, and some dimly robed actors, and the beautiful voices should be as important in poetical as in musical drama. The Elizabethan stage was so little imprisoned in material circumstances that the Elizabethan imagination was not strained by god or spirit.... We have made a prison house of paint and canvas, where we have as little freedom as under our own roofs, for there is no freedom in a house that has been made with hands.⁴⁵

Although he propounded that dramatists create the theatre, it is obvious that the theatre also partly creates the drama.

The restrictions of the Abbey brought other blessings. Since in a small theatre one man had to serve many functions, a certain unanimity of production was achieved which fulfilled Yeats's ideal of the union of the arts in his plays. For example, the playwright also designed the setting and directed the acting, while the stage designer could educate the

playwright in the techniques of the physical theatre.

2. Setting

The suspension of disbelief induced by the poetry of the ancestral drama would be shattered by any attempts at naturalistic scenery. A mood of sublimity and nobility must also be cultivated by all aspects of stage design, or the unconventionality of the verse speech would be embarrassingly conspicuous: "Poetry founded upon convention becomes incredible the moment when painting or gesture reminds us that people do not ordinarily speak verse."⁴⁶ Hence we can only eliminate that feeling of unreality we experience when listening to conventional speech by making the scenery as conventional.⁴⁷ The distance from naturalism chosen by the set-designer must coincide with that chosen by the poet.

The simplicity and severity of setting in Japanese drama provided the perfect background for the rich texture of the poetry and the beauties of speech in Yeats's plays. Such decorative scene-painting, grave, quiet, ritualistic is itself ancestral, since it annihilates any suggestion of specific time and place. It creates an ideal country where anything is possible - speaking in verse, or speaking to music, or expressing life in a dance; all is "phantastic, incredible

and luminous,"⁴⁸ the dream-like beauty of a Pre-Raphaelite painting. In other words, the scenery liberates the imagination, and allows it to create its own reality. The painstaking attempts of set-designers to achieve a "realistic" effect with paint and canvas only serve to detract the attention of the audience away from the fabric of the play. Such settings are but inferior landscape painting, a confusion of nature and art.

Fortunately Yeats found two kindred spirits in Gordon Craig and Charles Ricketts, both of whom designed sets for the Abbey in perfect accordance with his own ideas. Yeats said of Ricketts, "When we studied his art we studied our double. We, too, thought always that style should be proud of its ancestry, of its traditional high-breeding, that an ostentatious originality was out of place whether in the arts or in good manners."⁴⁹ It was Craig who provided the Abbey with screens, which hovered, advanced, retreated to create an impression of timelessness and motion in space.⁵⁰ These screens provided a flat surface against which the players were outlined, their movements thus clarified and emphasized. Like Yeats Craig was devoted to the ancestral theatre, or at least to the "Theatre of Beauty", of which he was to say: "I don't want to imitate man or Nature or anything else on the boards of a theatre." "I want to create a new world there - not to copy

the real world imperfectly." "Do not forget that there is such a thing as noble artificiality."⁵¹ Like Yeats, he took theatre back to its basic elements: he strived always for "unity of effect, based essentially on the balance and proportion of line, space, light, shade, and colour."⁵²

Diffuse and reflected light replaced any attempt at three-dimensionalism, or clutter of forms and colour. Movement and change of lighting prevented monotony by focussing attention on every new effect, such as change of outline. Each play had its own peculiar colour scheme, usually with two dominant colours in background and in costume, so that the actors either harmonized or contrasted with the backdrop, achieving the effect of a group portrait or tableau:

Because of this one can use contrasts of colour, between clothes and background or in the background itself, the complementary colours, for instance, which would be too obvious to keep the attention in a painting. One wishes to make the movement of the action as important as possible, and the simplicity which gives depth of colour does this, just as, for precisely similar reasons, the lack of colour in a statue fixes the attention upon the form.⁵³

Even after Yeats used the designs and music of Edmund Dulac for his Noh plays, he adhered to the basic principles of noble artificiality, simplicity of form, and severity of colour, which Craig and Ricketts advocated. In the theatre, only the effects peculiar to the stage should be developed, and there should be no attempt at recreating the "natural"



Musician in "At the Hawk's Well."

world in an artistic medium. But the theatre provided an opportunity for all arts to work together to create one complex work of art. Then the theatre would please poet, player and painter, and make possible "once more a noble, capricious, extravagant, resonant, fantastic art."⁵⁴

3. Characterless Acting

The ancestral theatre is not concerned with the exploration and presentation of the conflict and resolution within an individual, but with the archetypal experience of man. The character in this psychodelic drama is characterless, a state of mind rather than a person. Yeats tried to achieve the resonance of myth, a symbolic portrayal of man which knows no particularity. If character is not broadened so as to epitomize humanity, but on the contrary is individualized, the spectator ceases to be aware of myth and focuses on the amazing lifelikeness of character and the artist's power of imitation.⁵⁵ It is the function of the ancestral theatre to break the dykes that separate man from man, and suppress the distinctions of character:

The persons on stage...greaten till they are humanity itself. We feel our minds expand convulsively or spread out slowly like some moon-brightened image-crowded sea. That which is before our eyes perpetually vanishes and returns again in the midst of the excitement it creates, and the more enthralling it is, the more do we forget it.⁵⁶

Yeats endeavored to lessen or eliminate character, to diminish the power of daily mood, to cheat or blind its too clear perception, so that the imagination could glimpse the reality of experience below the surface of life. His plays take place in purgatory, the depths of the mind where the destiny of man is determined through conflict and choice. Character is submerged in the ancestral past, the individual is annihilated in the unity of time.

On the stage, Yeats tried to blur the outlines of individuality through diffuse lighting, and uniformity of costume. The masks worn by the actors are devoid of character and personal energy. "They are allied to decorations and to the abstract figures of Egyptian temples. Before mind can look out of their eyes, the active will perishes, hence their sorrowful calm."⁵⁷ The ritualistic technique of acting, however, with its expansive, stylized movements was more successful in directing the attention of the audience from the individual players to the whole art of the ancestral theatre: everything was directed towards the production of an intense, concentrated effect, and as with the scenery, all superfluities were eliminated. Irrelevant movement and gestures were reduced; the stage must become still so that the lyrical incantation of the verse would assume primary importance. This stilling and slowing permits the imagination to turn in

upon itself.⁵⁸

In order that the attention of the audience be concentrated on the speaker, a technique of stage grouping was devised by which the actors could efface their individuality. They were to be as statuesque as possible, speaking more to the audience than to each other, for they must endeavor not to disrupt the flow of passion from poetry to audience. Any gesture that was necessary to express emotion should be treated as a decorative art, and the more remote a play was from daily life, the more grave and solemn should the gesture be. Yeats abhorred the techniques of "modern" actors, who slurred over the most solemn passages, and strove constantly to attract attention to their bodily movements.⁵⁹ In general, acting must be simplified in order that speech might live in the imagination. The actor must not strive for complexity or ambiguity of portrayal, but display one quality of soul, one driving passion which underlies all his words and gestures. Such stylized, ritualistic acting helps to increase the distance from surface experience which encroaches upon the reality of the world of the imagination, the province of the ancestral:

If an actor becomes over emphatic, picking out what he believes to be the important words with violence, and running up and down the scale, or if he stresses his lines in wrong places, or even if an electric lamp that should have cast but a reflected light from sky or sea, shows from behind the

post of a door, I discover at once the proud fragility of dreams.⁶⁰

Yeats required that the playwright assume complete control of all aspects of the production, in order that the play remain the same integral work of art as it was originally created. Since the depth of meaning in his ancestral drama lay in the inflection and rhythm of the actor's voice, it was paramount to the life of the drama that he find or develop a company which exploited the natural music of the Irish idiom. This idiom effects a high, poetic style and an intense, heroic, passionate tone, the ancestral union of peasant cottage and noble tower. In the Fay brothers' company of amateurs, he found the perfect instrument for the expression of his genius. Its greatest asset was Frank Fay's beautiful elocution, soft rhythmic speech and delicate intonation. His lyrical presentation accorded well with the demands of Yeats's poetry, and the ancestral theatre as a theatre of speech was now realized.

4. Audience

Yeats's attitude to his audience is as ambiguous as his relationship with his actors. Although he asserted the supremacy of the dramatist in all theatrical matters, frequently overriding both director and actors with his dogmatic

opinions on production, he was also willing to listen to the advice of actors whose knowledge of the physical stage was beneficial to a man who had limited experience with its potentialities and weaknesses. The frequent revisions of his plays testify to the fact that he was willing to take advice, and learn from his mistakes. Similarly, he expressed extreme contempt for his audience on some occasions, while on others he judged his work by the reaction of the audience. Although he would like to preserve the unadulterated sanctity of his art, Yeats was also well aware that drama cannot exist in a vacuum. In fact, as has been previously pointed out, he felt the need of an audience, to gain the "emotion of multitude" so important to art, and thus indulged his passion for the theatre instead of confining himself to poetry. The ideal audience was for Yeats a small, intimate group of friends, about fifty or one hundred, who were sympathetic to his high aims, and could appreciate the subtleties of his art, who could "understand from sheer simplicity what [he understood] from scholarship and thought."⁶¹ The common "mob" aroused in him nothing but scorn, and he strove to ignore their ignorant criticisms. Artistic integrity was vital; he never lowered his standards, nor catered to the crowd: it is the business of the people to understand the poet, not the business of the poet to make himself understood. As a matter of fact,

popularity was regarded by both Yeats and Lady Gregory as a sure indication that the play was inferior. Yeats wanted to create "an unpopular theatre and an audience like a secret society where admission [was] by favor and never too many."⁶² He questioned the advisability of thrusting his works, which he had "written with imaginative sincerity, and filled with spiritual desire, before these excellent people who think that Rossetti's women are 'guys', that Rodin's women are 'ugly',⁶³ before the unimaginative press, and people digesting their dinners and shuffling their feet. The ancestral theatre was aloof and difficult, demanding the participating intellect of the audience, who created the play in their minds as it was performed. The experience acted on the stage was to be re-enacted by the audience. Ancestral drama was not so much entertainment as it was a personal experience. However, Yeats's early plays puzzled and confused the Abbey audience, who were completely uninitiated in such obtuse symbolism and staging. Certainly most of the dance plays would be difficult for any audience to understand without some knowledge of Yeats's theory and intention. Perhaps in pursuit of his high artistic aims, he neglected the importance of clarity and communication in the theatre. The Abbey gradually broadened its repertoire to attract a larger cross section of the population than would appreciate Yeats's drama,

and in defense of his ancestral aims, he proposed a more exclusive theatre in drawing-rooms or salons, where the audience was composed solely of invited friends. Of course this setting accorded well with his theories of Noh drama, but it also freed him from demands of mere clarity:

While writing these plays, intended for some fifty people in a drawing-room or studio, I have so rejoiced in my freedom from the stupidity of an ordinary audience that I have filled 'The Only Jealousy of Emer' with those little known convictions about the nature and history of a woman's beauty.⁶⁴

It is interesting to speculate which came first: Yeats's repudiation of the "common" audience, or the audience's rejection of Yeats. As T.H. Huxley observes in "Prolegomena to Evolution and Ethics":

However complete may be the indifference to public opinion, in a cool, intellectual view, of the traditional sage, it has not yet been my fortune to meet with any actual sage who took its hostile manifestations with entire equanimity. Indeed, I doubt if the philosopher lives, or ever has lived, who could know himself to be heartily despised by a street boy without some irritation.⁶⁵

In fact, Yeats's admirable theories on the advantages of a small theatre and select audience might be rationalizations for his own lack of popular success. He soon returned to the Abbey, determined to make it at least a business success, but he realized that it would never provide a permanent stage for his ancestral theatre.

IV

THE ANCESTRAL EMBODIED

How but in custom and in ceremony
Are innocence and beauty born?
Ceremony's a name for the rich horn,
And custom for the spreading laurel tree.

1. The People's Theatre

Yeats firmly believed that the roots of the ancestral theatre were in the folk imagination. But his own artistic inclination was more towards the heroic tower, than the peasant cottage. His plays illustrate this tension between the national and literary, between common life and the symbolic life of the imagination. It was only through collaboration with Lady Gregory that he felt he could create a people's theatre. She had a deep understanding of the feelings and language of the peasants, and could capture their colourful imagination and lyrical speech in her dramatic dialogue. While Yeats was in London, she kept him in touch with the true countenance of country life, when he "was getting too full of those little jewelled thoughts that come from the sun and have no nation."⁶⁶ He felt his own dramatic dialect inadequate and criticized the dialogue of The Pot of Broth, because

it lacked the richness and abundance of peasant speech. The vivid dialect of The Unicorn from the Stars was achieved only through the help of Lady Gregory:

I found myself with the old difficulty, that my words flow freely alone when my people speak in verse, or in words that are like those we put into verse.... She has enabled me to carry out an old thought for which my own knowledge is insufficient and to commingle the ancient phantasies of poetry with the rough, vivid, ever-contemporaneous tumult of the roadside.... Ever since I began to write I have awaited with impatience a linking, all Europe over, of the hereditary knowledge of the countryside, now becoming known to us through the work of wanderers and men of learning, with our old lyricism so full of ancient frenzies and hereditary wisdom, a yoking of antiquities, a Marriage of Heaven and Hell.⁶⁷

The Countess Cathleen is Yeats's first attempt to combine folk imagination with heroic legend in a drama which would express the reality of human emotions and spiritual capabilities. It is perhaps ironic that this play is the least typical of Yeats's ancestral theatre, and yet is the most widely known of his plays. The frequent revisions testify that he was never completely satisfied with it, and felt that it did not fully realize his aspirations for an experimental literary theatre.

Cathleen Ni Houlihan, written in 1902 and first performed in St. Teresa's Hall, before the founding of the Abbey, is more specifically national, even political in content, and although it centres around the Irish cottage and is rich with Gaelic songs, it borders on allegory. Yeats maintained,

however, that he was expressing a sense of the ancestral, since the play deals with universal human conflict and emotion; the history and myth of Ireland provide an ancestral milieu in which the lives of the characters are played out. Yeats portrays "the perpetual struggle of the cause of Ireland and every other ideal cause against private hopes and dreams, against all that we mean when we say the world."⁶⁸ The private life and personal desires of Michael Gillane are disrupted by the call of his country, and his happy love is supplanted by a tragic destiny of violence and death.

Cathleen Ni Houlihan was the first play of Yeats's Irish School of folk-drama. In it the actors first exemplified his ideas on minimum gesture and movement, so that the audience's attention might concentrate on their careful speech. This style of acting arose "partly out of deliberate opinion and partly out of the ignorance of the players."⁶⁹ The ancestral theatre was gradually taking shape, the result of conscious intention and dramatic inexperience.

2. The Theatre of Speech

Yeats indulges his romantic, mystical tendency to the full in The Shadowy Waters, an early attempt to symbolize the ancestral through a lyrical presentation of Irish legend.

The heroic now completely supplants the common life, the musical dialect of the peasant is replaced by convoluted verse, and the fabric of the play is rich with ancestral symbols such as birds, water and moon. In the constellation of these symbols resides the meaning of the play, not in the characterization or plot structure. It is in effect a narrative poem which found its way on to the stage by accident; the Abbey actors had taken it as an exercise for speaking verse, and Yeats decided to produce it on the stage. But it was never a dramatic success. The first night audience was puzzled by the obscurity of the myth, and bored by the preponderance of speech over action. Yeats had not yet resolved the tension between poetry and drama, nor sufficiently integrated his symbols into the structure of the play.

The dreamlike and remote atmosphere of The Shadowy Waters belongs to the timeless, placeless region of imaginative reality, though it is never free from the residues of romantic nostalgia which inform Yeats's early works. The setting of the play testifies to Yeats's early interest in painting and his concern with colour-scheme. The stage is divided into two areas of solid colour; on one side is a large sail of dark green, on the other, the sea and the sky suggested by a dark blue cloth. The expansiveness of the sky and of "the waste places of the great sea," (l. 2 & 3)

provides an unlimited backdrop to the actors. The costumes of blue and green complete the tableau effect of a painting. Yeats has "noticed that the more obviously decorative is the scene and costuming of any play, the more it is lifted out of time and place and the nearer to faeryland do we carry it. One gets also much more effect out of concerted movements - above all, if there are many players - when all the clothes are the same colour."⁷⁰ This beautiful monotony of colour makes "the players seem like people in a dream."⁷¹

Similarly the lighting underlines the symbols and themes of the play, by creating suggestive visual effects. The dim moonlight rendered even less distinct by wavering shadows enhances the dream-like atmosphere, but grows brighter at the climax of the play when Forgael perceives the symbolic torch of immortal love:

Impossible truths? But when the torch is lit
All that is impossible is certain.

(ll. 142-43)

The moonlight of imaginative reality is penetrated only by Aibric's torch of material actuality, which is soon dismissed by Forgael as being the false light of limited aspirations.

The purity and elevation of religious ritual is acted upon the stage through the slow, stately movement of the

actors and their incantatory tones of recitation. Yeats wishes the play to be acted "with a quiet gravity and a kind of rhythmic movement, and a very scrupulous cherishing of the music of the verse."⁷² What limited action takes place is reported: the battle is heard as confused cries. The sail covers all confusion and the mood of trance-like stillness is never disrupted.

Forgael's quest for immortal love is a search for the permanence and reality which lies below transient surface experience; the love of other men, which is but brief longing and deceiving hope, will not satisfy him, for he wishes to experience the deepest emotions of the ages:

There are some
That weigh and measure all in these waste seas -
They that have all wisdom that's in life,
And all the prophesying images
Made of dim gold rave out in secret tombs;
They have it that the plans of kings and queens
Are dust on the moth's wing; that nothing matters
But laughter and tears - laughter, laughter and tears -
That every man should carry his own soul
Upon his shoulders.

(11. 219-228)

The love which Forgael and Dectora achieve annihilates all boundaries of time; it belongs to the mythical past and the unknown future. This feeling of simultaneity, the realization of the ancestral, is stimulated by the music of Forgael's harp; art creates reality through the beauty of sound, and the truth of actuality becomes fiction:

What do I care,
 Now that my body has begun to dream,
 And you have grown to be a burning coal
 In the imagination and intellect
 If something that's most fabulous were true -
 If you had taken me by magic spells,
 And killed a lover or husband at my feet -
 I would not let you speak, for I would know
 That it was yesterday and not to-day
 I loved him.

(ll. 421-30)

It is Forgael's destiny to seek his antithesis in Dectora, to form a relation which culminates in emotional unity. He pursues his fate proudly and relentlessly, until his will is subsumed by the Anima Mundi and he dissolves into the world of dreams with Dectora. Words are inadequate to express the state of selfhood and complete elucidation which he seeks and presumably experiences:

I can see nothing plain; all's mystery.
 Yet sometimes there's a torch inside my head
 That makes all clear, but when the light is gone
 I have but images, analogies,
 The mystic bread, the sacramental wine,
 The red rose where the two shafts of the cross,
 Body and soul, waking and sleep, death, life,
 Whatever meaning ancient allegorists
 Have settled on, are mixed into one joy.
 For what's the rose but that? miraculous cries,
 Old stories about mystic marriages,
 Impossible truths? But when the torch is lit
 All that is impossible is certain,
 I plunge in the abyss.

(ll. 131-144)

Yeats tries to express the inexpressable moment of ecstasy which is the realization of the unity of time, the oneness of all experience. But The Shadowy Waters is an abortive attempt



Young Man in "At the Hawk's Well."

to symbolize the ancestral, for it remains an obscure Irish legend, full of beautiful and mysterious images. Idiosyncrasies of myth and obscure heroic protagonists cater to the glories of the ancestral past to the detriment of the clarity necessary for universal significance. Yeats is immersed in his romantic world of jewelled thoughts that have no nation. The Shadowy Waters is not dramatically alive; it is a flat mosaic of brilliant colour and musical speech.

3. The Ancestral Hero

The heroic figure of Cuchulain strides through Yeats's ancestral theatre with a frequency which deserves note. Although he emphasized that his theatre should be without individualization of character, Yeats imparts a vitality to Cuchulain which seems to contradict his intentions. However, this Irish hero is not a specific individual so much as he is a part of folk belief which shares the same archetypes as the myth of all cultures. The ancestral hero epitomizes all the virtues of a race; he is a symbol of its aspirations and its weaknesses.

It is not surprising then that Standish O'Grady should revive Cuchulain as an ideal Homeric hero. "Twenty years later Lady Gregory translated the whole body of Irish heroic legend into the dialect of the cottages in those great books

Cuchulain of Muirthemne and Gods and Fighting Men, her eye too upon life. In later years she often quoted the saying of Aristotle: 'To think like a wise man, but express oneself like the common people', and always her wise man was heroic man."⁷³ Through the re-articulation of the Cuchulain myth, Yeats was able to restore the equilibrium between the peasant cottage and the aristocratic tower in his ancestral drama. His better plays counterpoint the heroic grandeur of myth and plebeian humour, although the Cuchulain legend is adaptable to several different forms - On Baile's Strand, a tragedy; The Green Helmet, an heroic farce; and At the Hawk's Well, one of Four Plays for Dancers.

On Baile's Strand was first produced at the opening of the Abbey Theatre in 1904, and was written specifically for the conventional stage, "a large platform with a door at the back and an exit through the audience at the side, and no proscenium or curtain; and being intended for a platform and a popular audience... is full of... good round speeches."⁷⁴ The extensive revisions of the play are for the most part simplifications, in keeping with Yeats's developing sense of austerity in verse and scene. The revised setting is rendered more dream-like than the original by a vague light suggesting sea-mist. Through diffuse lighting and a plain background of sacking, Yeats tries to eliminate any suggestion of time and

place. The mythical world in which his actors move is as much a part of the present as the past.

On Baile's Strand draws on the art of several different cultures. Cuchulain wears a mask and head-dress, a "noble, half-Greek, half Asiatic face which [appears] like an image seen in reverie by some Orphic worshipper. [Yeats hoped to attain] the distance from life which can make credible strange events, elaborate words."⁷⁵ Though the chorus of Greek tragedy is vestigial in this play, Yeats's chorus does perform essentially the same function. It links past, present and future, it places the action it witnesses within the sequence of time, it strengthens the feeling of inevitable doom. But the forbodings of the chorus of women are not always accurate. They cannot escape their mortal limitations any more than can Cuchulain. Their errors in prophecy provide another level of irony in the play. But their comments on the impotence of man, of his inability to sense or change his destiny or free himself from the consequences of past deeds, point to the tragic theme of the ancestral theatre:

Life drifts between a fool and a blind man
To the end, and nobody can know his end.

(11. 623 & 24)

The women mourn for humanity; Cuchulain's suffering becomes an archetype of the human condition. This appeal to the pervasive feelings of man, Yeats terms "the emotion of multitude":

The Greek drama has got the emotion of multitude from its chorus, which called up famous sorrow, even all the gods and all heroes, to witness, as it were, some well-ordered fable, some action separated but for this from all but itself....⁷⁶

Yeats also achieves the emotion of multitude through a sub-plot, which balances between comedy and tragedy, facetiousness and insight, as do Shakespeare's sub-plots, and the characters recall the fool and blind man of Lear:

The Shakespearian drama gets the emotion of multitude out of the sub-plot which copies the main plot, much as a shadow upon the wall copies one's body in the firelight. We think of King Lear ^{less} as the history of one man and his sorrows than as the history of a whole evil time.... Very commonly the sub-plot is the main plot working itself out in more ordinary men and women, and so doubly calling up before us the emotion of multitude.⁷⁷

In fact, the fool and blind man both imitate and parody Cuchulain and Conchubar on a lower scale. Like the two heroes, they are engaged in a ceaseless conflict of values, yet need each other for survival. The fool is childlike, superstitious, close to the supernatural world as in Cuchulain, whereas the blind man displays more cunning and wisdom: Cuchulain "is the fool - wandering, passive, houseless and almost loveless - Conchubar is reason that is blind because it can only reason because it is cold."⁷⁸ These two clowns frame the play.

They introduce their heroic counterparts, and dismiss them at the end with words which juxtapose tragic realization, and indifference; common life continues with its pettiness and pilfering despite tragic deaths and heroic deeds. The

ancestral nobility of myth, the intense emotions of dead heroes are given reality in the present through this common folk element, which is close to the surface impulses of humanity - the quotidian existence of the struggle for food and warmth.

In the play within the play at the beginning of On Baile's Strand, the fool and blind man mimic Cuchulain and Conchubar, and the blind man's words foreshadow the whole sequence of events to follow. His careless knowledge underlines Cuchulain's words and actions with tragic irony. His quarrel with the fool parodies the fight between Cuchulain and his son at the end of the play. It provides a terrible contrast of insignificant and vital events. The accusations of the fool also define the relation of Cuchulain and Conchubar:

You stay safe, and send me into every kind of danger. You sent me down the cliff for gull's eggs while you warmed your blind eyes in the sun; and then you are all that were good for food.

(ll. 642-45)

Through their struggle the fool has gained a limited amount of wisdom, but like Cuchulain, who blames Conchubar for his fatal mistake, he is unable to act upon it. It is the fool who unwittingly reveals the horrible truth of the origins of the young man, a truth which gradually and remorselessly dawns upon Cuchulain's consciousness, until he is forced to

confront its naked significance. The partial knowledge of the fool is clarified by the blind man: "It is his own son he has slain." (l. 748) These two characters externalize Cuchulain's internal awakening and bring him to the peak of passionate suffering.

The conflict between Cuchulain and Conchubar in part defines the nature of the ancestral, for their values are those of the quotidian versus the heroic. Conchubar is the prosaic opposite of Cuchulain; his concern is for the peace and safety of his kingdom and the preservation of order through legal succession. Ironically it is Conchubar who values ancestry and descendants, while Cuchulain scorns sons who "have no pith,/ No marrow in their bones, and will lie soft" where he lies hard. (ll. 256-58) His fame will survive the erosion of time and be a more fitting monument than a family line:

I think myself most lucky that I leave
No pallid ghost or mockery of a man
To drift and mutter in the corridors
Where I have laughed and sung.

(ll. 260-63)

But in fact, he takes great pride in his ancestry, for he has supernatural origins:

For he that's in the sun begot this body
Upon a mortal woman.

(ll. 493 & 94)

The only son that he will acknowledge must also be conceived by the union of mortal and immortal. The ironies within the play multiply when he wishes that the strange young man who has come to kill him were his son:

Boy, I would meet them all in arms
 If I'd a son like you. He would avenge me
 When I have withstood for the last time the men
 Whose fathers, brothers, sons, and friends I have killed
 Upholding Conchubar.

(11. 579-83)

Unwittingly he destroys the very ancestral line he had so unconsciously desired. He slays the son he denies and the young man he would like as a son in complete ignorance of his actions. The young man's affection is perhaps the only thing which could attach his heroism to domestic affection,⁷⁹ and prevent his destructive pride from destroying itself. In a letter to Frank Fay, Yeats described his ancestral hero as proud, barren, and restless, as if out of sheer strength of heart or from accident he had put affection away. He lives among young men but has himself outlived the illusions of youth.... Probably his very strength of character made him become quite early in life a deliberate lover, a man of pleasure who can never really surrender himself. He is a little hard, and leaves the people about him a little repelled - perhaps this young man's affection is what he had most need of. Without this thought the play had not had any deep tragedy.... The touch of something hard, repellent yet alluring, self-assertive yet self immolating, is not all but it must be there.⁸⁰

Cuchulain's destruction of his ancestral heritage is the indirect result of the ^{om}comprise of his integrity when he submitted to Conchubar. He has verbally sworn allegiance to

the pragmatic and materialistic values of the High King, and subordinated his "might of hand and burning heart" (l. 354) for the preservation of a static society. Thus weakened, when faced with the choice between his impetuous feelings for the young man, and the reason imposed by Conchubar's authority, he chooses against his own nature, and the consequence is a tragic revelation of the full meaning of his mistake. He destroys the ancestral values which are the fabric of his being.

The consequences which were not realized when his own father challenged him to battle are now suffered by his son. The life of the individual is part of a remorseless cycle of events which were initiated by his ancestors, and he must live out the consequences:

Boy,
If I had fought my father, he'd have killed me,
As certainly as if I had a son
And fought with him, I should be deadly to him.

(ll. 592-95)

Within man are limitations which will debase even the most heroic natures. When Cuchulain learns the full extent of his actions then he experiences the helpless fury of humanity faced with its own impotence. Only in fighting the sea, an impersonal power commensurate with his rage and grief can he find scope for his emotions.

On Baile's Strand achieves a high level of drama, and

probably is Yeats's best articulation of his sense of life as tragedy. But it is not the epitome of the ancestral theatre, for if judged by the theories Yeats himself propounds as the ideals he seeks to realize in drama, this play represents a compromise. Yeats recognized himself that On Baile's Strand was a form of condescension to the "mob", and he proceeded on to new experimental forms to develop the Cuchulain legend in a manner more satisfactory to himself.

In The Green Helmet Cuchulain is a more symbolic hero, less individualized and without the deep emotional conflict portrayed in On Baile's Strand. Again Yeats counterpoints the common and heroic, the cottage and the tower which inform his life and art, but he achieves more of a ritualistic, tableau effect both in action and in setting. The characters are carefully balanced and contrasted, and pose with stylized grace against a background of pronounced colour: a house of orange-red with black furniture stands before a green and luminous sea. All the characters except the Red Man and Black Men are in various shades of green. This artificiality of structure erases any suggestion of time and place. Granted, The Green Helmet is supposed to be a farce, and the elements can thus be more readily stylized, but the general trend of the ancestral theatre is now towards increasing artificiality, and Cuchulain is established as its hero:

As the Abbey Theatre became increasingly dominated by political interests, and what he called the Cellars and Garrets, the school of "naturalism", Yeats turned away from the conventional stage and conventional drama to romantic dreaming and to the nobility of tradition: he might "have founded a school that could have substituted, as only a literature without satirical or realistic prepossessions could, positive desires for the negative passion of a national movement beaten down into party politics,"⁸¹ but was repelled by the bitter political struggles and the absence of any cultural interest. He realized when he wrote The Four Plays for Dancers that a typical Irish audience would not understand the complexities of Noh drama, but he was trying to re-establish for himself and for the select few who yet retained an artistic sensibility, a theatre of aesthetic purity:

In writing these little plays I knew that I was creating something which could only fully succeed in a civilization very unlike ours. I think they should be written for some country where all classes share in a half-mythological, half-philosophical folk-belief which the writer and his small audience lift into a new subtlety.⁸²

These dance plays were to be like Greek plays,

the simple fable, the logically constructed plot, the chorus of the people, their words full of vague suggestion, a pre-occupation with what is unchanging and therefore without topical or practical interest.⁸³

The Cuchulain cycle provides the myth which informs two of The Four Plays for Dancers. Cuchulain's character is merely a lineament for the deeper forces of life which give reality to experience. *At the Hawk's Well* ~~The play~~ defines the nature of the ancestral by presenting Cuchulain's moment of choice between the heroic and the common, between the hawk and the well. Every dramatic element is concentrated on the way in which he confronts his destiny. The ritualistic pattern reduces gesture and speech to complete simplicity of presentation and establishes an intimate relation with the audience in the drawing-room. Yeats hopes to gain in elegance and subtlety what he loses in mass and power: "If drama is to remain vital, it must move in either of two directions - upward in ever-growing subtlety or downwards, taking the soul with it until all is simplified."⁸⁴

The physical setting of the play is any bare space before a wall against which stands a patterned screen. Special lighting is rejected because it separates the players from the audience by its artificiality, and Yeats wants the whole impact of the strangeness of mask, movement and costume to be felt. The curtain is replaced by a cloth, which is

symbolically folded and unfolded by the musicians at the beginning and end of the play. But an imaginative scene is painted by the words of the chorus, a barren, foreboding setting of age and death, a timeless, placeless region of the mind:

I call to the eye of the mind
A well long choked up and dry
And boughs long stripped by the wind.

(11. 1-3)

The chorus of musicians also measure the passage of time by their ritualized movements and songs of transience and death. The atmosphere they create is one of fear and horror. Like the chorus of Japanese drama, the musicians contribute significantly to the play, but remain aloof from the action. They accompany the puppet-like movements of the actors with the music of drum, gong and zither, prepare for and explain the action through their songs, bewail the tragic condition of man, and form the link between the actual and imaginative worlds. They take the audience with them into the depths of the mind's reality. In most respects, the natural is subordinate to the symbolic: all the actors either wear masks or paint their faces to resemble masks; the hawk-like dance of the Guardian of the Well emphasizes the dominant motif of the play - the hawk, which symbolizes the heroic life which is Cuchulain's destiny.

The ancestral hero is a tragic figure; he feels the limitations of his mortality much more acutely than common man because of his extreme state of awareness. At the Hawk's Well dramatizes the moment of choice of the ancestral hero, the instant when aspirations and limitations are weighed and his destiny is formed. Cuchulain is called by the spirit of the heroic away from the peace of the peasant cottage to a life of violence and suffering. He will experience the tragedy of existence because he accepts life entirely, with all its joy and pain, but he will have participated in the deepest thoughts and emotions of humanity.

The Old Man is an anti-heroic figure motivated by fear and greed, a prefiguration of what Cuchulain would be should he have made the wrong choice. Like the withered tree, he sits beside the well of immortality, but will never be refreshed by its waters. Because he fears the pain inflicted by life, he withdraws from it and stagnates towards death:

The accursed shadows have deluded me,
 The stones are dark and yet the well is empty;
 The water flowed and emptied while I slept.
 You have deluded me my whole life through,
 Accursed dancers, you have stolen my life.
 That there should be such evil in a shadow!

(11. 230-35)

Cuchulain's choice is the bitter life of wisdom. He turns away from the dry stones and withered tree which promise only a sterile peace, and seeks the ancestral heritage of tragic

involvement. By actively imposing his will on life, he masters the process of living, while fully accepting its absurdity.

4. The Ancestral House

The Words Upon the Window-Pane is concerned with the ancestral as it manifests itself in the history of a country, and in the life of an individual who typifies an era of history. Yeats does more than indulge his preoccupation with tradition and ancestry. He contrasts the heroic epochs of the past with the decadent and superficial present. The ancestral past is evoked by spiritism to participate in the actions of the living.

The play unfolds in an ancestral house similar to that of Lady Gregory, which testifies to the heroic spirit of the time in which it was built, when men of intellect were powerful in society and state. But it also symbolizes the decay of the ancestral: once a country-house surrounded by flourishing trees and gardens, it now harbors transient lodgers. The setting appears naturalistic, but is primarily symbolic, and integral to the action and meaning of the drama. The entrance of objective scene into this play does for the scene what the dances do for the action in the dance plays.

Its significance is brought directly into the deeps of the mind with the aid of formal convention. The house is both a national and artistic shrine, and a shrine sacred to Swift. His life and the history of Ireland are symbolized by the decay of the house, for Swift is the chief representative of the intellect of his epoch, an arrogant intellect free from superstition. His degeneration mirrors the decline of Irish grandeur. Yet the past has left an indelible mark on the windows of the house, a poem written by Stella to Swift which praises his ability to transcend the temporal:

You taught how I might youth prolong
 By knowing what is right and wrong;
 How from my heart to bring supplies
 Of lustre to my fading eyes;
 How soon a beauteous mind repairs
 The loss of chang'd or falling hairs;
 How wit and virtue from within
 Can spread a smoothness o'er the skin.

(ll. 453-60)

Swift is an ancestral figure who belongs to history instead of myth. Devoted to the heroic virtues of freedom, spiritual fullness and individuality, he lived in an age which gradually forgot the heroic and indulged in the superficial pleasures of the present. Like Yeats, Swift endeavored to build a monument of art to his intellect before he succumbed to the madness of his epoch. But like Cuchulain he violently denies his need for heirs; his art alone must perpetuate his intellect, for he refuses to chance the nature of

his offspring, in a disintegrating epoch. In a sense he destroys his ancestral line as does Cuchulain and the Old Man of Purgatory, by denying himself heirs. He is compelled to re-experience this destruction of the ancestral by returning to the earth in spirit to relive the moment of choice, when he asserted his intellect and denied his passions in his relations with Stella and Vanessa. But his agony finds expression solely through the medium, Mrs. Henderson, and he never appears in person. The heroic passions of the past become a reality in the present and determine its events. Yeats sought "an image of the modern mind's discovery of itself, of its own permanent form, in that one Irish century that escaped from darkness and confusion."⁸⁵ He felt an affinity with the age and with Swift; he considered Swift an ancestor who had molded his own character from eighteenth century values. Yeats felt a part of the ancestral past, its history and its individuals. He is but a small part of one coil of the gyre of life which connects past and future:

Thought seems more true, emotion more deep, spoken by someone who touches my pride, who seems to claim me of his kindred, who seems to make me a part of some national mythology, nor is mythology mere ostentation, mere vanity if it draws me onward to the unknown; another turn of the gyre and myth is wisdom, pride, discipline.⁸⁶

Although The Words Upon the Window-Pane is a more conventional drama, which seems to repudiate many of Yeats's

intentions for his ancestral theatre, it does explore the nature of the ancestral from a more naturalistic, historical point of view. The heroic passions of the past exist not only in the mythical world of Cuchulain, but in the "real" world of such petty individuals as Mrs. Mallet and Abraham Johnson, who are completely absorbed by their own trivial concerns. The final expression of these passions, Swift's desire for complete annihilation, shatters the external reality of the frame. They have escaped the control of the medium to assert their own vital integrity in the life of the present. Swift's savage indignation will never be laid to rest, for the deep emotions of the ancestral past are re-experienced by future individuals who have escaped the confines of time. Yeats achieves this sense of the unity of past, present and future by juxtaposing the words of the dead with the speech of the living, the lyrical intensity of verse with the flatness of "natural conversation". Greek and Christian tradition inform the language of Dr. Trench and Mr. Corbet, adding a sense of depth in time which contrasts sharply with the superficiality of the other participants of the séance.

Purgatory dramatizes the complete destruction of the ancestral house in a form which realizes the best features of the ancestral theatre. It discards the superficialities of the dance-plays, but retains the essential form of the Noh

drama - the union of stark simplicity and complex symbol. Realism is simplified and stylized; the play is symbolic without excluding the naturalistic world.⁸⁷ The scenery is suggested by a ruined house and bare tree, both of which are integral to the meaning and structure of the play. The ancestral house in which "Great people lived and died" (l. 61) lies in blackened ruins, "its threshold gone to patch a pigsty". (l. 11) The aristocratic lineage of its inhabitants has been polluted by the marriage of the Old Man's mother with a debased groom, who has cut down the ancestral trees and burned the house. The consequences of this union of aristocratic and bestial are the lives of the Old Man and his son, "A bastard that a pedlar got/ Upon a tinker's daughter in a ditch." (ll. 89 & 90) Yeats's fear that his descendants will corrupt his ancestral legacy of nobility and beauty is realized in Purgatory. The chestnut tree, the great-rooted blossomer is withered and sterile. The base passions of man have destroyed not only an aristocracy but a whole way of life, a culture, an heroic era. Once the disintegration is initiated, each successive generation becomes more debased: whereas the Old Man retains some of his mother's intellect, his son lacks any refining qualities. He is, in fact, a reincarnation of the groom, with the same vices and cunning: "Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold".

The Old Man is forced not only to live out the consequences of his mother's debasement, he must also witness their origin. The dead live again in the present and determine the lives of their descendants. "The dead suffer remorse and recreate their old lives.... There are medieval Japanese plays about it and much in the folklore of all countries."⁸⁸ The dead dream back through the more personal thoughts and deeds of life, until they can terminate the consequences of their actions, or someone else does it for them. The Old Man tries to free his mother's soul from purgatory and himself from the consequences of her actions by destroying his son, and thus terminate the ancestral line:

I finished all that consequence.
 I killed that lad because had he grown up
 He would have struck a woman's fancy,
 Begot, and passed pollution on.

(11. 204-207)

But the sacrificial murder of his son re-enacts the murder of the father, and adds to the links of consequence instead of breaking them. Like his mother the Old Man re-experiences the crimes of the past with no hope of expiation. By murdering both his father and his son, he completes the destruction of the ancestral, but he can never free himself from the remorseless cycle of life because he lacks the heroic capacity for transcendence of the limitations in his past. He has just enough self-awareness to recognize his own baseness and

suffer for his mother's deed. His passion finds expression in an agonized cry, the cry of suffering humanity:

O God
Release my mother's soul from its dream!
Mankind can do no more. Appease
The misery of the living and the remorse of the dead.

(ll. 220-23)

Yeats achieves a simultaneity of time in Purgatory by dramatizing both subjective and objective actions. The past lives again in the mind of the Old Man, and is externalized through setting and symbol. There is, in fact, a play within a play, an unending sequence of mirror images, which reflects the tragic condition of life and the interminable consequences initiated by man's first parents. When he witnesses the return of the groom to the lighted window of the house, the Old Man murmurs words which originate in the depths of the past:

'Then the bride sleep fell upon Adam':
Where did I read those words?

(ll. 183-84)

Purgatory realizes Yeats's ancestral theatre in both content and form. It incorporates the heroic tower and the peasant cottage, the dual impulse of his art. The form is ritualistic and aristocratic; characters, setting and action are portrayed with stylized simplicity so that the attention is focused on the highly symbolic, but colloquial verse. Yet Purgatory puzzled its first audience in 1938, and Yeats

felt compelled to explain its meaning. The ancestral theatre demands more of the imagination and intellect than an audience is usually prepared to give, and is therefore criticized for its obscurity. Drama is one art form which must communicate, or it ceases to be drama. Yeats's plays had to either compromise some of their high imaginative ideals, or repudiate their claim to the stage. A poet may write in isolation, but a playwright may not.

CONCLUSION

The best of Yeats's ancestral plays avoid the ephemeral by achieving a depth and concentration in meaning and style. The compact one-act structure and the intensity of the poetry heighten the emotional impact. The living experience of humanity is assimilated and expressed in an art form which utilizes the best of several arts.

Yeats initiated an interest in verse drama which received its culmination in T.S. Eliot and Christopher Frye. The whole question of the nature of reality raised at the beginning of the twentieth century found expression in a new dramatic method which employed deliberate unfamiliarity of surface in order to break through surface experience. But such highly symbolic drama has its limitations, for it sacrifices probability of event and character and deliberately denies the audience its preconceptions of the relation of art and life. On Baile's Strand alone of Yeats's ancestral plays incorporates the symbolic intensity of verse, and a semblance of probability in character and action, but it represents a compromise of his absolute theories, and strikes a precarious balance between the literary and the dramatic, which is difficult to maintain. When verse drama compromises with

probability it usually admits absurdity. The audience must appreciate its complete stylization or reject the form entirely. The Abbey audience was not ready for the ancestral theatre, and returned to the theatre of commerce and naturalism, but Yeats did not surrender his preoccupation with drama. His experiments in the drawing-room were comparatively short-lived, and he realized that he must come to terms with the demands of the traditional stage if he were to succeed as a dramatist. He was challenged by the discrepancy between the imaginative reality of art and the theatre's criteria of probability and naturalism. The resolution of this discrepancy constitutes for Yeats, the fascination of the difficult:

The fascination of what's difficult
Has dried the sap out of my veins, and rent
Spontaneous joy and natural content
Out of my heart. There's something ails our colt
That must, as if it had not holy blood
Nor on Olympus leaped from cloud to cloud,
Shiver under the lash, strain, sweat and jolt
As though it dragged road-metal. My curse on plays
That have to be set up in fifty ways,
On the day's war with every knave and dolt,
Theatre business, management of men.
I swear before the dawn comes round again
I'll find the stable and pull out the bolt.

FOOTNOTES

1. Yeats, "Poetry and Tradition", Essays and Introductions, 255.
2. Yeats, "Estrangement", XXV, Autobiographies, 473.
3. Yeats, "Discoveries", Essays and Introductions, 284.
4. The tower as fact and symbol will be discussed in Part I.
5. T.S. Eliot, quoted from R. Williams, Drama from Ibsen to Eliot, 26.
6. Yeats, note to "At the Hawk's Well", Variorum Edition of the Plays, 415.
7. Yeats, quoted from Clark, Yeats and the Theatre of Desolate Reality, 13.
8. Yeats, "Synge and the Ireland of his Time", Essays and Introductions, 322.
9. Yeats, Discoveries, 1906, quoted from Williams, 239.
10. This idea of "the noble and the beggar-man" will be discussed more fully in Part I.
11. from Malone, The Irish Drama, 31.
12. Introduction to "An Indian Monk", Essays and Introductions, 429.
13. Yeats, Samhain, 1902, quoted from Boyd, The Contemporary Drama of Ireland, 35.
14. Yeats, "A Peoples' Theatre", Plays and Controversies, quoted from Williams, 225.
15. Ibid.
16. Yeats, quoted from Ann Saddlemyer, "The Noble and the Beggar-Man", The World of W.B. Yeats, 23.

17. Yeats, The Letters, to John Quinn, July 23, 1918, p. 651.
18. Yeats, letter to John Quinn, quoted from Saddlemyer, "The Noble and the Beggar-Man", 24.
19. Ibid., 25.
20. Yeats, Preface to The Unicorn from the Stars and Other Plays, 1908, Variorum, 1295.
21. Yeats, The Letters, to Olivia Shakespeare, April, 1922, p. 680.
22. Williams, 171.
23. Yeats, Preface to The Poetical Works of William B. Yeats, 1907, Variorum, 1294.
24. Yeats, 'The Theatre', "Ideas of Good and Evil", Essays and Introductions, 168-69.
25. Yeats, Advice to Playwrights, quoted from Malone, 129 & 130.
26. Saddlemyer, "The Noble and the Beggar-Man", 39.
27. Kavanagh, The Story of the Abbey Theatre, 11.
28. quoted from Boyd, 45.
29. Yeats, "Certain Noble Plays of Japan", Essays and Introductions, 224-25.
30. Yeats, "The Tragic Theatre", Essays and Introductions, 243.
31. Williams, 298-99.
32. Yeats, note on Sophocles King Oedipus, Variorum, 851.
33. Yeats, note on "On Baile's Strand", Variorum, 851.
34. "Certain Noble Plays of Japan", 221.
35. Variorum, 775.
36. Yeats, Preface to Four Plays for Dancers, 1920, Plays and Controversies, 332.

37. "Certain Noble Plays of Japan", 226.
38. Gordon Craig to Yeats, quoted from Saddlemyer, "The Heroic Discipline of the Looking-Glass", The World of W.B. Yeats, 99.
39. This description of the Noh plays is taken from Clark, 43-44.
40. Yeats, note on "At the Hawk's Well", Variorum, 415.
41. "Certain Noble Plays of Japan", 224.
42. Williams, 241.
43. Yeats, "At Stratford-on-Avon", Essays and Introductions, 100.
44. Robinson, The Irish Theatre, 77.
45. Yeats, Preface to Poems, 1895, Variorum, 1289.
46. Yeats, "The Theatre", Essays and Introductions, 169.
47. "At Stratford-on-Avon", 101.
48. Yeats, note on "The Player Queen", Variorum, 761.
49. Saddlemyer, "The Heroic Discipline of the Looking-Glass", 99.
50. Ibid., 96.
51. Craig, *ibid.*, 95.
52. Ibid., 96.
53. Yeats, note on "The Green Helmet", Variorum, 454.
54. Yeats, Preface to Plays for an Irish Theatre, Variorum, 1300-1301.
55. Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy, 106.
56. Yeats, "The Tragic Theatre", Essays and Introductions, 245.
57. Yeats, "Estrangement", Autobiographies, 470.

58. Yeats, "An Introduction for my Plays", Essays and Introductions, 527 & 529.
59. Yeats, "The Reform of the Theatre", quoted from L. Robinson, Ireland's Abbey Theatre, 32.
60. Preface to Plays for an Irish Theatre, 1299.
61. Yeats, Beltaine, 1899, quoted from Kavanagh, 14.
62. Yeats, letter to Lady Gregory in The Irish Statesman, 1919, quoted from Kavanagh, 116.
63. Beltaine, 1899, quoted from Kavanagh, 14.
64. Yeats, note on "The Only Jealousy of Emer", Variorum, 566.
65. T.H. Huxley and Julian Huxley, Touchstone for Ethics, 56-57.
66. Yeats, note to "Cathleen ni Houlihan", Variorum, 232.
67. Yeats, note to "The Unicorn from the Stars", Variorum, 712.
68. Note to "Cathleen Ni Houlihan", 234.
69. Ibid., 233.
70. Note to "The Green Helmet", 454.
71. Yeats, note on "The Shadowy Waters", Variorum, 341.
72. Ibid., 342.
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74. Yeats, Preface to Plays in Prose and Verse, Variorum, 1306.
75. "Certain Noble Plays of Japan", 221.
76. "Emotion of Multitude", Essays and Introductions, 215.
77. Ibid., 215-216.

78. Yeats, letter to Frank Fay, 29 Jan., 1904, The Letters, 424.
79. Nathan, The Tragic Drama of William Butler Yeats, 110.
80. The Letters, 424.
81. Yeats, note on "The Only Jealousy of Emer", 572.
82. Ibid., 566.
83. Ibid., 572.
84. Yeats, quoted from Kavanagh, 24.
85. Yeats, note on "The Words Upon the Window-Pane", Variorum, 958.
86. Ibid.
87. Clark, 23.
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